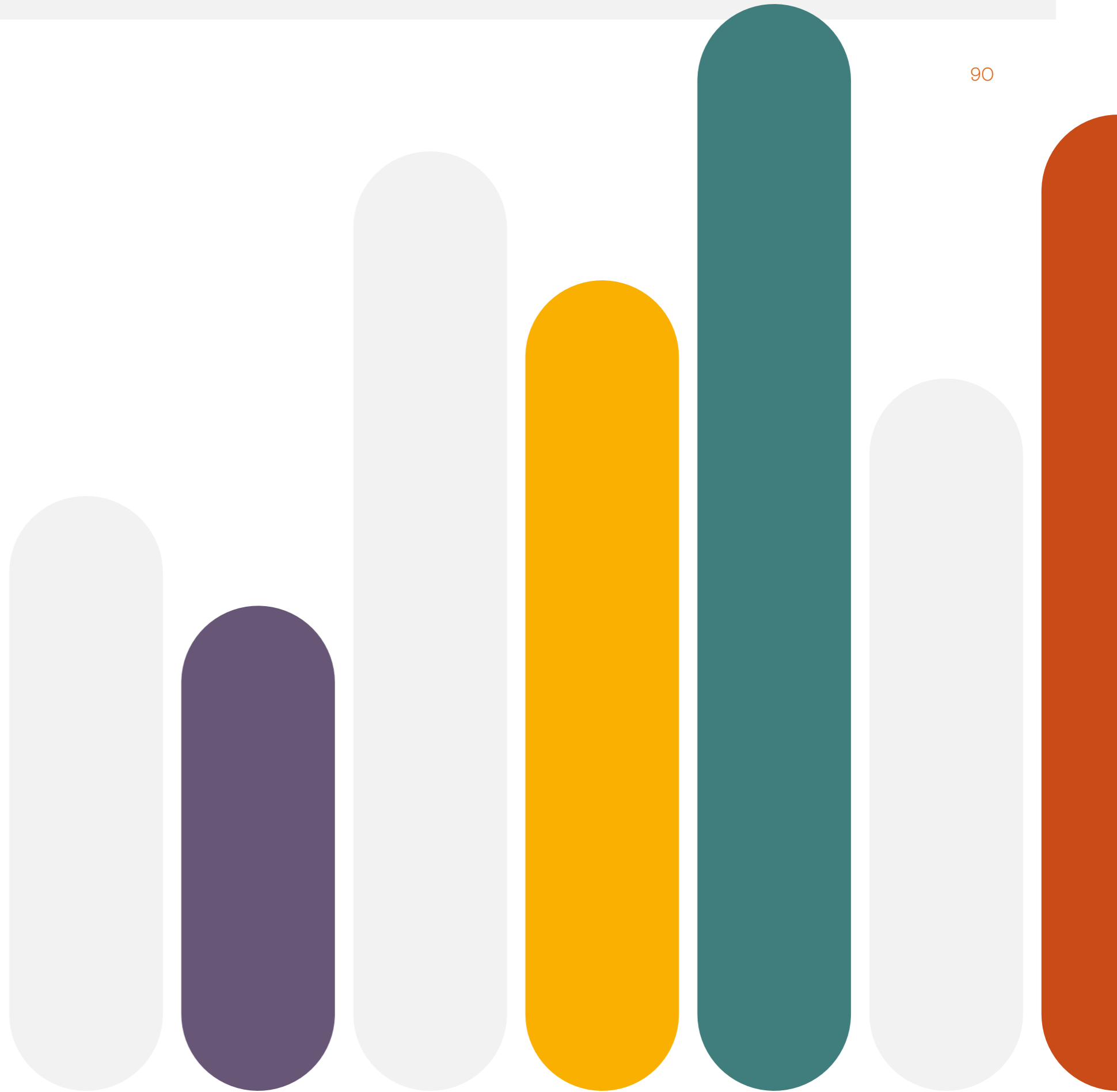


# Jewish Wisdom



### Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal

CEO  
Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ)

The Talmud (Taanit 23a) teaches, “O *havruta o mituta*—friendship or death!” This stark teaching speaks to the human need for belonging and community in every aspect of our lives—in our families, in communities, and also in our workplaces. This sense of belonging is expressed through our professional relationships. It is also expressed through common mission and purpose, coming together as a team to impact the world in positive ways. Jewish tradition implies that the world is imperfect, and requires humanity to come together to perfect God's creation. We are all, in this respect, part of “God's team,” pursuing a more sustainable, just, and kind world. And Jewish tradition provides us with the tools to pursue that, including study (to know the good), prayer (to feel dissonance between the ideal world of the prayer book and the reality we see each day), and acts of kindness. We find belonging through the relationships we form, and the transformation we accomplish together.

### Rabbi Avi Killip

Executive Vice President  
Hadar Institute

יְכַל הַמִּצְעָר עִצְמוֹ עִם הַצָּבֹר — זֹכָה וְרוֹאֶה בְּנֶחֱמַת צָבוֹר.  
“Anyone who is distressed together with the community will merit seeing the solace of the community.” — Taanit 11a  
The Talmud underscores a lesson that we have learned the hard way these past few years: Sharing hard times together leads to the most meaningful sense of belonging. Tractate Taanit teaches us how to weather times of drought. The rabbis respond to prolonged periods without rain by calling for communal fasting. These moments remind us both of our vulnerability and our interdependence—we all need rain. They also offer us agency through belonging. When we come together with a shared purpose and goal, when we make the suffering a shared burden, we are able to truly appreciate the sweetness when the rains do begin to fall again.

### Rabbi Ayalon Eliach

Chief Ideas Officer  
Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah

As institutional representatives and servants of the Jewish community, Jewish organizations face a unique challenge in fostering a sense of belonging: Their employees might feel like they belong to the staff team, but—because of their diverse backgrounds—not to the larger Jewish people that the organization represents or serves. This tension can lead to alienation from the organization itself.

In an era of increasing loneliness and meaninglessness, this challenge can also be an opportunity. As representatives of the larger Jewish people, Jewish organizations have the power to model what it's like to be a community where all who share a vision for and work towards bettering the world feel like they fully belong.

#### So how can Jewish organizations seize this opportunity?

When describing the Levites, who fulfill a special role of service within the Jewish people, Maimonides went out of his way to write that his description applies not only to a particular ethnic tribe, but also to “any person from anywhere on earth whose spirit moves them” (Mishneh Torah, Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee 13:13). What Maimonides teaches us is that in Jewish life, regardless of our origins, our chosen commitments give us equal belonging even in the seemingly most tribal of contexts. Jewish organizations can inhabit this ethos by stressing that by committing to work in a Jewish setting, every one of their employees, regardless of background, does not just belong to that particular organization, but also to a much larger community of common purpose.

### Rabbi Simcha Willig

Faculty  
The Frisch School and Yeshiva University

While welcoming and treating employees generously is fundamental in an organization there is an additional value of how we let them go. “Shalom” in Hebrew means hello and goodbye. Etymologically, the word shalom indicates wholeness. In what way is feeling whole fundamental to the experience of not only entering but also leaving?

Abraham, known for his open-tent hospitality (Midrash Tehillim 110), was careful to escort each of his departing guests. Based on Abraham's practice, the Jewish legal tradition (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning, Chapter 14) codifies an expectation for a host to literally walk a guest out of the home into their journey, demonstrating and creating a sense of connection.

This form of shalom, expressing interest in the welfare of a departing guest, is called levaya in Hebrew. Levaya means connection. (Onkelos on Genesis 29:34.) Even, and especially, as a guest is departing, we must foster a sense of belonging. When a guest, or employee, departs, he or she does not become a stranger but rather feels tethered

through care and community to the home they leave.

How do our employees depart? What feelings do we express and engender through that process? How connected does he or she feel even as they move on? Feeling positive connections to the organization in which a person no longer works facilitates openness and a more ready attachment to the next organization. A positive departure can boost, not break, the parties involved, leading to a stronger sense of community for all.

## How can Jewish wisdom help us create belonging in our organizations?

### Alexandra Corwin

Executive Director  
Ammud: Jews of Color Torah Academy

There are many aspects that go into the layered task of creating an organizational culture that authentically and seriously values belonging. One aspect is how an organization frames learning. To paraphrase Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers (4:1), those who are wise are those who learn from every person. When a person knows that their whole self, unique insights, and ways of being are to be learned from and valued it has a positive impact and fosters belonging. Organizational leaders have the opportunity to create work cultures that value and elevate the connection between belonging and the Jewish value of learning from every person.

### Rabbi Becky Silverstein

Faculty member  
SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva and co-initiator of the Trans Halakha Project

I experience belonging as the feeling of having a claim on a place and community, and their having a claim on me. “To have a claim” is to have a sense of connection, of pride, of responsibility. Hillel gives this language in Pirkei Avot 2:4, teaching “אל תפרש מן הצבור / Do not separate from the community.” In his commentary on this text, Derekh Hayim, the Maharal (Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel c.1512-1609) teaches that essence of this text lies in the coming together of the group—in the ways in which the community represents a different type of connection to the divine, the power that exists in coming together, and the steadiness or grounding over time that a community can represent, creating a container for individual change.

We can understand both Hillel and the Maharal as presenting a relationship between the individual and the community that is deepened through mutual relationship—a person has the obligation to stick with the community and benefits from communal participation, just as the community has the obligation to create the conditions for individuals to be present and connected and benefits from that individuals presence. By recognizing the ways in which a community or workplace and those within it are connected and actualizing a sense of connection, care, and responsibility for one another, we can increase belonging, support individual growth, and increase our communal power.

### Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

rabbituchman.com

Feeling a sense of belonging in the workplace has never been as important as it is today. Not only are many teams in wholly or largely remote environments, we also live at a time in which those of us whose social locations and/or identities have led to our marginalization are asking for much better. Judaism, at its core, is a tradition that asks us to show up for one another. A foundational principle is that we all were at Sinai, together, to receive Torah. Our presence allows us to take ownership of this inheritance. Throughout the thousands of years of Jewish existence, we have been engaged in an intergenerational conversation about what exactly that means. No doubt exclusion in Jewish communities is an issue of absolute paramount importance. Our tradition can help serve as a counterweight to this with its insistence that every single one of us, across space and time was present at Sinai. A collective revelation serves as a model for what our organizations can feel like when we insist that every single one of us on our team belongs there. We are strengthened by difference, just as the Jewish tradition is enriched by the wonderful diversity of the Jewish people in every place we live.